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SUBJECT: VIETNAM: US MILITARY DONATION WELCOMED IN MEKONG DELTA

¶11. Summary. In a goodwill event that generated enthusiastic local and national press coverage, Acting Consul General, Defense Attaché Col. Stephen Ball, U.S. Army Pacific John Almarez, and Congen Econoff, participated in a handover ceremony at Can Tho General Hospital to commemorate the donation of surplus US Army medical equipment valued at over USD300,000. The hospital director noted in his remarks that the heart defibrillator donated had already saved 15 lives. Dramatic interest in Col. Ball's presence as well as the willingness to work closely with and recognize the role of the U.S. military are positive signs that the US - Vietnam defense relationship is moving forward. After Department of Health officials expressed a further need for help for the not yet opened Can Tho Delta Regional Hospital, DOD is now in the process of identifying hospital beds from surplus stock that it may be able to donate. End summary

Ceremony Generates Significant Press

¶12. The handover ceremony was held at the Can Tho General Hospital, a six hundred bed public hospital that serves Can Tho and surrounding provinces. About 100 people - doctors, nurses, provincial officials, and a large number of reporters - crowded into the meeting room which, in addition to a large bust of Ho Chi Minh, had on display some of the items that had been donated in the shipment. The event generated significant press interest, airing on local and national TV newscasts and instigating several print articles.

¶13. Taking pride of place at the front of the room was a centrifuge along with other electronic equipment. During the ceremony, local officials, including Can Tho Hospital Director Dr. Tran Sophia, thanked the U.S. Consulate General and the U.S. Army for the gift and noted that much of the equipment was already in "efficient use." Most dramatically, Dr. Sophia noted that the defibrillator included in the donation had already "saved the lives of 15 patients." This comment was welcomed with thunderous applause.

¶14. The donation, which included everything from bandages and surgical tables to high tech electronic equipment, is valued at well over three hundred thousand US dollars. It came from the Department of Defense Humanitarian Assistance Program - Excess Property from two sites in Japan. The donated surplus medical supplies arrived in Vietnam in two shipments - one in October last year and another this January. John Almarez, International Logistics Plans Officer with U.S. Army Pacific, who handled much of the logistical issues for the U.S. military, traveled from Hawaii to attend the ceremony.

¶15. In her remarks the acting CG noted that this gift was part of an overall assistance effort undertaken by the USG in Vietnam, and that a number of projects have had a direct impact on Can Tho and the rest of the Mekong Delta. As Vietnam's largest bilateral donor in the area of HIV/AIDS programs, for example, the USG funds a program in Can Tho run by Family Health International. The U.S. also funds cultural and university programs at Can Tho University and provides disaster assistance to families hit by flooding in the Delta. The Mekong Delta also benefits from programs at the national level focused on BTA implementation, such as the STAR project.

Eyes and Cameras Turn to the Man in Uniform

¶16. In his remarks, Col. Ball noted that while economic activities attracted the most attention in the growing and deepening U.S. - Vietnam relationship, our defense relationship was also growing. He stated that the officer exchanges, conferences, and regional meetings in which both the U.S. and Vietnamese militaries participated were important. He called this gift to the Can Tho General Hospital a small display of the U.S. commitment to building a positive relationship with Vietnam.

¶17. The presence of Col. Ball generated a great deal of interest. He is probably the first US military officer in uniform that many of these people had seen in some time. When he rose to speak he was literally showered with flashbulbs as photographers rushed to capture the moment. At the conclusion of the ceremony reporters and others eager to meet him and express their thanks again surrounded Col. Ball.

Additional Donations Possible

¶18. The Health Department of Can Tho is currently constructing a

new hospital that should open sometime at the beginning of next year. The current facility is a group of buildings, some clearly dating from the French Colonial period, which are showing their age. Hospital officials made a point to show that much of the equipment was already being used, and after the ceremony the delegation was given a quick tour where they could see some of the equipment in use. The hospital director also pointed out some of the larger pieces of equipment such as a couple of dental chairs and related equipment that were still in crates and would be used in the new hospital facility. Col. Ball and Mr. Almarez were impressed with the efforts of the hospital staff to make good use of the equipment. Mr. Almarez is already in the process of trying to locate surplus hospital beds that could perhaps be donated under the humanitarian assistance program to the new facility.

Comment - A Reason to Feel Good

19. Comment: This handover ceremony was truly a "feel good" event. Department of Health authorities, which had peppered Congen with phone calls in the days leading up to the event to get it "just right," were clearly interested in expressing their appreciation and demonstrating that the equipment was being put to good use. At a time when irritants in our trading relationship - such as the catfish anti-dumping case which will have a direct impact on Can Tho's seafood processing industry - often take center stage, this event suggests that a reserve of goodwill exists in the Mekong Delta. In particular, the interest and press coverage of the military aspect of this event is another positive sign for the continuing development of the defense relationship.

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